



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

## Edinburgh Research Explorer

### **[Review of] C. Laes and J. Strubbe, *Youth in the Roman Empire: the Young and the Restless Years?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014)**

#### **Citation for published version:**

Roth, U 2018, '[Review of] C. Laes and J. Strubbe, *Youth in the Roman Empire: the Young and the Restless Years?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014)', *The Journal of Roman Studies (JRS)*, vol. 107, pp. 217-218. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0075435818000801>

#### **Digital Object Identifier (DOI):**

[10.1017/S0075435818000801](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0075435818000801)

#### **Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

#### **Document Version:**

Peer reviewed version

#### **Published In:**

The Journal of Roman Studies (JRS)

#### **Publisher Rights Statement:**

This article has been published in a revised form in The Journal of Roman Studies <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0075435818000801>. This version is free to view and download for private research and study only. Not for re-distribution, re-sale or use in derivative works. © Cambridge University Press.

#### **General rights**

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

#### **Take down policy**

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact [openaccess@ed.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@ed.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



*The Journal of Roman Studies* 107 (2018)

C. LAES and J. STRUBBE, *YOUTH IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE: THE YOUNG AND THE RESTLESS YEARS?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. Pp. xxii + 256, illus. ISBN 9781107048881. £67.00.

The book under review is the slightly revised English translation of a 2008 Dutch monograph by Christian Laes and Johann Strubbe, offering discussion – for the lay reader *and* the ancient historian – of youth in the Roman Empire, i.e. roughly the mid-teens to the mid-20s in the lives of (as the authors put it) boys and girls. The authors commit to a biological definition of youth, starting with puberty (which makes the mid-teens too late in my view as the starting-point for the study of female youth), and ending with the completion of cerebral development roughly a decade later. The book responds to a (Dutch) debate on the nature of Roman youth: crudely put, was youth conceptually and actually a non-entity at Rome, or did the biological developments lead to noticeable differences in the behaviour and practices of youths, entailing the social recognition of adolescence as a distinct life-phase? Notwithstanding some qualifications and reservations, Laes and Strubbe argue for the latter, acknowledging also that there were differences over time regarding theory and practice of (what we call today) adolescence. Laes has recently rebutted severe criticism of their contribution, maintaining that their approach enables a stimulating and human encounter (*Salesianum* 2017).

The book opens with an overview of select contributions to the study of youth, historical, sociological and anthropological, and a summary of the (different) views and approaches of Eyben, Pleket, and Kleijwegt. Following brief discussion of the challenges inherent in the study of Roman youth, eleven chapters explore various aspects and sources of immediate relevance. Chapters 2 to 4 deal still with broader issues, concerning the human life-cycle and rites of passage, and the terminology and characteristics of youth. Chapter 5 explores ancient observations of the physical changes in the pubescent body, drawn primarily from the medical and philosophical literature (esp. Galen and Aristotle). Chapters 6, 9 and 10 deal with what one could call ‘the professional life-cycle’: schooling and education, public office holding, occupational training. Youth associations (i.e. the *ephebeia* and *inventus*) are discussed in Chapter 7 (with the negative result that ‘(t)he study of the youth associations unfortunately provides no answer to [the posited] questions’: 135). Chapter 11 deals with adolescents and (and in) marriage, followed by discussion of the role of youths in early Christianity, in Chapter 12. Chapter 8 – with 30 pages almost the longest – tackles the knotty issue of adolescent restlessness. Throughout these chapters, description and synthesis (and opinion, esp. in Chapter 7) trump analysis and argument, foregrounding that the book is intended ‘(f)or the general reader with a broad cultural and historical interest’ (xiii). That reader will indeed find much of interest, generally well-presented and discussed: the chosen examples are intriguing and whet one’s appetite for more – such as adolescent euergetism, ‘student life’, and generational conflicts. The aim to offer *also* new research is less well accomplished, including in Chapters 7 and 9 that promised however ‘(n)ew views [...] based on a thorough and scholarly study of the ancient sources’ (xiii). Overall, the handling of the sources is mixed, the relationship between evidence and research distorted. For instance, in their discussion of paternal powers, Titus Manlius Torquatus’ death-sentencing of his own son is cited, with the conclusion that ‘new research has demonstrated that [...] the father acted not on the grounds of his private *potestas* but in his capacity as magistrate’ (151): but that is plain from Livy (8.7.19: *consulum imperia*). Moreover, proposed identifications of youthful behaviours are not duly scrutinised for their *particular* ‘youthfulness’. One example: ‘chariot races, amphitheatre games, brothels, parties’ are linked to ‘university’ youths (93-4): does this mean that Columella’s

*The Journal of Roman Studies* 107 (2018)

undesirable *vilicus*, ‘used to leisure, gymnastics, race-courses, theatres, dining, wine shops, and brothels’ (DRR 1.8.2), was a youth? Perhaps. But the point is that the identification of ‘a separate youth culture’ (98) requires due contextualisation and qualification of the associated behaviours – which is, however, lacking. A 5-page Conclusion reemphasises the ‘biological basis for being young’ (228), expressing the hope for future elaboration of the topic.

Repeated acknowledgement of a concentration on elite males is interspersed with the occasional discussion of the situation of young women, e.g. concerning marriage (esp. 210-3) and membership in the *iuventus* (123-7), and the odd aside on non-elite youths. The elitist androcentric focus is nevertheless overwhelming: *Male Elite Youth in the Roman Empire* would be a more appropriate book-title. To exclude ‘male’ and ‘elite’ from the title means to participate in the marginalisation of those excluded – i.e. young women (and, it is necessary to state, not ‘girls’) and men of non-elite status, contributing to practices that silence female and non-elite Romans in our historical imagination. A human approach to the topic would avoid marginalisation-by-title and – indeed – by approach, however difficult a proposition the latter. Doing so will raise analytical and interpretative issues that are not equally obvious in the chosen male elite cases, allowing one to test conclusions and hypotheses at their conceptual limits. If the lives of a few wealthy lads who enjoyed the unusual leisure to let their biological clock run riot suggest that ‘youth may indeed [...] be described as a stormy phase in life’ (232), the question of the relationship between wealth and genes, between the social and the biological, presses forward: can ancient historians address this issue to take the debate on the subject forward – accepting the challenges of dealing with the bulk of the population and of research more broadly?

ULRIKE ROTH, The University of Edinburgh, [u.roth@ed.ac.uk](mailto:u.roth@ed.ac.uk)

This article is published by *The Journal of Roman Studies* and should be cited from that publication, including from *The Journal of Roman Studies* page numbers.